



In 1888, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote:

“What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism.”

Nietzsche, The Will to Power

Nihilism is the conviction that there is no meaning to life, that the world is inhospitable to our highest hopes and values, and that there are no gods or higher purposes to justify our suffering. To be a nihilist is to flirt with despair and the sentiment that life is not worth living, and thus, the nihilist position is antithetical to life.

“...the question whether not-to-be is better than to be is itself a disease, a sign of decline...The nihilistic movement is the expression of physiological decadence.”

Nietzsche, The Will to Power

Although nihilism has existed in all times and places, it is especially prevalent in the modern West. To understand why, we are going to turn to the insights of Friedrich Nietzsche. Specifically, we are going to examine why Nietzsche thought that all the dominant worldviews of the West have been pessimistic evaluations of life, and thus, precursors to modern nihilism.

In 1885, Nietzsche saw the specter of nihilism looming on the horizon of Western civilization, and as he wrote:

“...why has the advent of nihilism become necessary? Because the values we have had hitherto thus draw their final consequence; because nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals...”

Nietzsche, The Will to Power

The West has long been under the spell of worldviews predicated on the existence of what Nietzsche called a true world. Such worldviews posit that along with this flawed earthly reality, there exists another, more perfect reality – a true world. Or as the philosopher Julian Young further explains in his book *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*:

“A true world is a destination; a destination such that to reach it is to enter (or perhaps re-enter) a state of ‘eternal bliss’, a heaven, paradise or utopia. Hence true-world philosophies...give meaning to life by representing it as a journey; a journey towards ‘redemption’, towards an arrival which will more than make up for the stress and discomfort of the travelling...a true-world account of the proper course of our lives is a kind of story, a narrative.”

Julian Young, The Death of God and the Meaning of Life

One of the first, and most influential, true world philosophies in Western history was forged in the mind of the Ancient Greek philosopher Plato. According to Plato, the earthly reality we perceive with our senses is a deception. It is akin to watching shadows on the wall of cave. Plato called this deceptive reality the world of Becoming, and posited that behind it exists an unchanging world of Being, a true world, which is the realm of the Forms. For Plato the meaning of life is to turn away from our senses, temper our emotions, and through the development of our intellect grasp the Forms that exist in the world of Being. This is the path to truth, to enlightenment, and to the elimination of suffering, and as Julian Young writes:

“Plato’s way of giving meaning to life...has dominated virtually the entire history of Western thought and feeling. I am referring, here, in the first instance, to Christianity – though, as we will see, Platonism (which I use as a synonym for ‘true-worldism’) continued, in disguised forms, to dominate Western thinking even in the materialist atmosphere of the post-Christian era. But let us attend, for now, to Christianity.” (Julian Young)

Julian Young, The Death of God and the Meaning of Life

Nietzsche famously wrote that “Christianity is Platonism for the masses”, by which he meant that the Christian worldview is a slightly modified version of Platonism, but with greater mass appeal. For like Platonism, the Christian worldview is a true world theory. According to it, this world is a spiritually and morally degraded, or “fallen”, world, and in it we suffer for sins against God. Yet over and above this fallen world exists the kingdom of heaven – the true world – where the souls of the righteous find salvation, redemption, eternal life, and happiness, following the death of their mortal flesh.

“One does not, I think, need much convincing that Christianity (according to Nietzsche, the product of St Paul’s grafting of Jesus’ ethics on to Greek metaphysics) is basically a version of Platonism, of the true-world/true-home view of reality. There is, of course, not a complete identity between Platonism and Christianity. There is, for example, no omnipotent creator-God in Plato...Yet in both the Platonic and the Christian story...

there is the same metaphysical division between the natural and the supernatural worlds, between earth and heaven, with the latter portrayed as home and the former as a place of exile.”

Julian Young, The Death of God and the Meaning of Life

It is well known that Nietzsche heralded the death of god, by which he meant that in the West the belief in a monotheistic god was in decline. Yet what is less known is that he also forecasted that following the death of god true world theories would continue to flourish. However, rather than positing a transcendental heaven and redemption in the afterlife, these post-Christian true world philosophies structured themselves around the possibility of redemption in this life, and the coming of a heaven on earth that is forged by the hands of men. Nietzsche referred to these post-Christian true world theories as “shadows of god”, and as he wrote:

“God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown.”

Nietzsche, The Gay Science

The political ideologies which plagued the 20th century, be it fascism, socialism, communism, or totalitarianism, are shadows of god. Nietzsche called socialism “latent Christianity”, while Carl Jung, 75 years after Nietzsche, took note of the correlation in Europe between the decline in religious belief and the rise in political fanaticism.

“The State takes the place of God...the socialist dictatorships are religions.”

Carl Jung, The Undiscovered Self

The practitioners of these political true world theories wanted to socially engineer a New Man who would be redeemed from past defects and sins, and they promised their followers that, if given enough power and control, the State would construct a true world, a heaven on earth. The Nazi ideology, for example, promised the coming of an Aryan utopia, while the theologian of communism, Karl Marx, stated that the arrival of a communist utopia would mark what he called “the end of history”.

“Communism is Utopia, that is nowhere. It is the avatar of all our religious eschatologies: the coming of the Messiah, the second coming of Christ, nirvana. It is not a historical prospect, but a current mythology.”

Immanuel Wallerstein, Historical Capitalism with Capitalist Civilization

In the 20th century Czech writer Milan Kundera echoed this sentiment:

“Totalitarianism is not only hell, but also the dream of paradise—the age-old dream of a world where everybody would live in harmony, united by a single common will and faith...If totalitarianism did not exploit these archetypes, which are deep inside us all and rooted deep in all religions, it could never attract so many people...”

Milan Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting

In our age, there exist still other shadows of god. Some of the more radical environmentalist movements are seeking to harness State power in order to radically diminish humanity's impact on nature and create an environmental utopia, where humans redeem themselves from what are seen as sins against Mother Earth. Some believe that if we follow science, and harness the power of technology, big data and artificial intelligence, we will be able to construct a technocratic, or scientifically managed utopian society. The transhumanist movement is predicated on the belief that by merging man with machine we will be able to transcend human frailties and, at some point in the future, become like gods. Many spiritual movements see the world as invariably moving towards a utopia characterized by universal love, freedom, and harmony.

While all these shadows of god possess flocks of disciples, today the true world theory of choice for the masses is what the 20th century psychologist Michael Mahoney called the myth of arrival. Those who subscribe to this myth believe that one day they will reach a turning point in life; all their frustrations and problems will disappear, and they will finally be happy. In other words, they believe that in the future they will enter their own personal utopia, or true world, or as Mahoney writes:

“Embedded in the myth of arrival...is the message that...there will come a day when our struggles and suffering will be finished. Depression, anxiety, anger, and all manner of “ill being” will finally end. We will wake up one morning and clearly recognize that we have “arrived”: We will have gotten ourselves and our lives “together” in a way that can never be undone. We will be healthy and happy. We’ll be in the job, the home, and the relationship that we have always wanted, financially comfortable and fundamentally at peace with ourselves.”

Michael Mahoney, Constructive Psychotherapy

What Platonism, Christianity, and the post-Christian political and secular shadows of god have in common is that at essence they are deeply pessimistic. Putting aside the question of whether a true world does or ever will exist, all these worldviews are predicated on a rejection of this earthly reality and a condemnation of the present moment, or as Nietzsche explains:

“...the concept “the true world” insinuates that this world is untruthful, deceptive, dishonest, inauthentic, inessential—and consequently also not a world adapted to our needs.

Nietzsche, The Will to Power

What is it that leads people to reject this earthly reality, which is the only reality we know for certain exists, and to posit the existence of true world? According to Nietzsche, it is a psychological need which is the driving force behind all true world philosophies. Those who subscribe to these worldviews tend to be morally and spiritually weak and unable to cope with the human condition without a psychological crutch. Such people, therefore, *need* to believe in the existence of a true world where they will find lasting peace and salvation, otherwise, they would be crippled by suffering and incapable of enduring life. Or as Nietzsche writes:

“General insight: it is the instinct of life-weariness...which has created the “other world”...to imagine another, more valuable world is an expression of hatred for the world that makes one suffer...Does man not eternally create a fictitious world for himself because he wants a better world than reality?”

Nietzsche, The Will to Power

As true world philosophies are pessimistic evaluations of our lot on earth, they are precursors of nihilism, for as Nietzsche wrote: “*Pessimism is a preliminary form of nihilism.*” (*Nietzsche, The Will to Power*) All that is required to move from being a believer in a true world to a full-blown nihilist is a simple crisis of faith. For if, or when, doubt deflates one’s belief in a true world, then one is forced to confront the possibility that this earthly reality and the here and now – which one has already judged to be irreparably flawed and insufficient – is all there is. In the *Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes:

“The development of pessimism into nihilism.... – The repudiated world versus an artificially built ‘true, valuable’ one. Finally: one discovers how the true world is fabricated solely from psychological needs: and now all one has left is the ‘repudiated world’, and one adds this supreme disappointment to the reasons why it deserves to be repudiated. At this point nihilism is reached:...one grants the reality of becoming as the only reality... — but cannot endure this world...”

Nietzsche, The Will to Power

As true world theories are pessimistic and a mere step away from nihilism, Nietzsche thought that to overcome nihilism what modern man needs is a worldview not dependent on a true world. We need a worldview which, rather than repudiating this earthly existence, justifies, affirms, and even embraces the suffering that is indispensable to it. We need a worldview that helps us cultivate meaning in the present moment, and in the only life we know for certain we have. We need, in short, a worldview that promotes human flourishing by remaining faithful to the here and now and to this earth. And in the next video, we will explore Nietzsche’s worldview predicated on the will to power, which he put forth as an alternative to true world theories.

“I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes! Poison-mixers are they, whether they know it or not. Despisers of life are they, decaying and poisoned themselves, of whom the earth is weary: so let them go.”

Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra